

The Books of 1, 2, and 3 John, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 9: Assurance of Eternal Life

1 John 5:13-21

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This closing passage is John's statement of purpose, and its central doctrine is the assurance of eternal life. The teacher should affirm clearly that John intends believers to know they have eternal life; genuine assurance is not arrogance but a gift God wants His children to enjoy. At the same time, the teacher must define that assurance carefully. John writes to those who believe, and throughout the letter he has defined real faith as a living, obedient faith that walks in the light, keeps the commandments, and loves the brethren. The assurance John offers therefore rests on genuine, obedient faith confirmed by a faithful walk, not on a bare past decision.

This is the doctrinally sensitive heart of the lesson, flagged for careful handling. The teacher should present real assurance as grounded in genuine faith and a faithful walk, and should distinguish it plainly from the presumption of once saved, always saved. John's own letter has warned that people go out from among us (2:19), that we must abide, and here he both assures us of God's keeping power (v. 18) and immediately warns, keep yourselves from idols (v. 21). The teacher should hold these together: God truly keeps His own, and His own truly keep themselves from idols and remain faithful. Assurance and the call to perseverance are not enemies. The believer is genuinely kept, and genuinely called to hold fast, and the warning against idols at the very end shows that even assured believers must guard their devotion.

Formationally, the lesson aims to give doubting believers real, well-founded confidence, to stir confident prayer, including intercession for struggling brothers, and to sharpen the believer's sense of living as God's people in a world under the evil one. It should end where John ends, with undivided devotion to the true God and vigilance against the idols that would quietly take His place.

Question 1

Student Question:

John says, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" (v. 13). What does this teach about whether a Christian can have real assurance of salvation, and on what basis that assurance rests?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John states his purpose plainly: that believers may know they have eternal life. The teacher should affirm without hesitation that real assurance is possible and intended. God does not

want His children living in perpetual uncertainty about their standing; He wants them to know they have life.

Identify whom John addresses: those who believe in the name of the Son of God. Assurance is for believers, and John has spent the whole letter defining what genuine belief looks like. So the basis of assurance is not a single past event remembered, but a present, living faith in Christ that shows itself in walking in the light, keeping His commandments, and loving the brethren.

Show the two grounds of assurance John has woven together. First and foremost is the objective testimony of God about His Son and His promise of life in Him (5:11–13); assurance rests on God's word, not our worthiness. Second are the evidences of new life in us, the marks John keeps naming, faith, love, obedience, which confirm that we are genuinely in Christ. Assurance leans first on God's promise and is confirmed by the fruit of His work in us.

Apply it pastorally. To the believer who is trusting and following Christ, however imperfectly, John says: you may know you have eternal life. This is not arrogance but the settled confidence God gives His children. The teacher should help students receive this as the gift it is.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The reality and intent of assurance: that believers may know they have life (v. 13)
- Assurance for those with a living, obedient faith, as defined throughout the letter
- The primary ground of assurance in God's promise and testimony (5:11–13)
- The evidences of new life (faith, love, obedience) as confirming assurance

Discussion Prompts

- Does God want His children to live in uncertainty, or in assurance? How do you know?
- On what does true assurance primarily rest?
- How do the marks of new life confirm, without earning, our assurance?

Question 2

Student Question:

John wants believers to know they have eternal life. Do you live with settled assurance or with nagging doubt about your standing with God, and what does this passage suggest about where to look for confidence?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question meets students where many live, somewhere between confidence and chronic doubt. Invite honesty without shame. Many sincere believers carry a low hum of uncertainty about whether they are truly right with God.

Help them locate the source of their doubt. Sometimes doubt comes from looking inward at our inconsistent performance and feelings, which will always give an unsteady verdict. Sometimes it comes from a genuine problem, persistent unrepentant sin, that the conscience is rightly flagging. The two require different responses, and discernment matters.

Point them to where John points: away from the unsteadiness of feelings and toward the firm testimony of God and the genuine marks of His work in them. Assurance grows as we rest on God's promise of life in His Son and notice, with gratitude, the real, if imperfect, faith, love, and obedience He has worked in us.

Apply it with balance. The believer plagued by doubt despite a genuine walk should be encouraged to rest on God's promise rather than their moods. The person whose doubt arises from unaddressed sin should be lovingly urged to confession and renewed obedience, where assurance is restored. The aim is settled, well-founded confidence, neither anxious nor presumptuous.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Doubt arising from looking to feelings and performance rather than God's promise
- The difference between doubt from a tender conscience and doubt from real unrepentant sin
- Assurance grounded in God's testimony and confirmed by the marks of His work
- Settled confidence that is neither anxious nor presumptuous

Discussion Prompts

- Do you live more in assurance or in nagging doubt? Why do you think that is?
- Is your doubt coming from your feelings or from a real issue needing confession?
- Where does this passage tell you to look for confidence?

Question 3

Student Question:

John says we have confidence that "if we ask anything according to his will he hears us" (vv. 14–15). What does this teach about the nature and conditions of confident prayer, and how is praying according to God's will different from simply getting whatever we want?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John links assurance to bold prayer. The child who knows he is loved and secure asks freely. So confident prayer flows from the assurance just described. But John attaches a vital condition: we have confidence when we ask according to His will.

Explain praying according to God's will. This is not a loophole that empties the promise but the key that unlocks it. To pray according to God's will is to align our asking with His revealed

character and purposes, to want what He wants. It is the opposite of treating prayer as a mechanism for getting whatever our desires dictate.

Contrast it with the distortion that prayer is a blank check. Some treat these verses as a promise that God will grant anything we ask if we believe hard enough. John says otherwise: the promise is for prayer according to His will. This protects us, for God in His love will not grant requests that would harm us or contradict His good purposes.

Apply it to the life of prayer. Praying according to God's will means soaking our requests in Scripture, submitting them to His wisdom, and trusting that His answer, yes, no, or wait, is the loving response of a Father who knows best. Such prayer is offered with great confidence, not because we control God, but because we trust Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Confident prayer flowing from assurance as God's children
- Praying according to God's will as the condition of the promise (vv. 14–15)
- Against prayer as a blank check for our own desires
- Trust in the Father's loving wisdom in how He answers

Discussion Prompts

- How does assurance of God's love free us to pray boldly?
- What does it mean to pray according to God's will rather than our wants?
- How does trusting the Father's wisdom shape how we handle His answers?

Question 4

Student Question:

John calls us to pray for a brother who is caught in sin (v. 16). How seriously do you take the responsibility to intercede for fellow believers who are struggling, and who is one person you should be praying for in this way?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John turns confident prayer toward one another. He envisions a believer seeing a brother caught in sin and praying for him, and promises that God will give life in response. Intercession for struggling fellow believers is presented as a normal, expected ministry of every Christian.

Press the responsibility gently. We are quick to criticize or gossip about a struggling brother and slow to pray for him. John calls for the opposite: that when we see a fellow believer in sin, our first move is intercession, asking God to restore and give life. This is love in action toward the failing.

Help students feel the dignity of this. God uses our prayers in the rescue of one another. We are not helpless spectators of a brother's struggle; we are given a real part through prayer. To neglect this is to leave undone a ministry God has entrusted to us.

Apply it concretely. Ask each student to name one fellow believer they know to be struggling, and to commit to praying for them rather than merely worrying or talking about them. Encourage them to see intercession as the loving, hopeful response to the failures of those around them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Intercession for struggling believers as a normal Christian ministry (v. 16)
- God using our prayers in the restoration of one another
- Prayer rather than criticism or gossip as the loving response to a brother's sin
- The believer's real part in another's rescue through prayer

Discussion Prompts

- How seriously do you take praying for fellow believers who are struggling?
- What is the difference between worrying or gossiping about someone and interceding for them?
- Who is one person you should commit to praying for this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

John distinguishes between sin that leads to death and sin that does not (vv. 16–17). What might John mean by this, and what does it teach about the seriousness of persistent, unrepentant sin versus the sins for which we confess and are cleansed?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Acknowledge at the outset that this is a difficult verse on which faithful interpreters differ, and the teacher should hold it with appropriate humility while drawing out its clear thrust. John distinguishes a sin that leads to death from sin that does not lead to death, and limits his instruction about prayer accordingly.

Offer the most coherent reading in light of the whole letter. The sin that leads to death is most likely persistent, hardened, unrepentant rejection of Christ and the truth, the path of the false teachers who denied the Son and went out from among the believers. Such deliberate, settled apostasy, while never beyond God's mercy should one repent, is spiritually deadly because it turns from the only source of life. By contrast, the sins that do not lead to death are the failings of those who, walking in the light, confess and are cleansed (1:7, 9).

Draw the doctrinal lesson carefully. This is not a license to rank some sins as trivial; all unrighteousness is sin (v. 17). The point is the difference between sin that is confessed and forsaken within a faithful walk, which is continually cleansed, and sin that is clung to in hardened impenitence, which leads to death. The danger is not the stumble but the settled refusal to repent.

Apply it with both sobriety and comfort. To the believer worried that some particular failure is unforgivable, the comfort is that the sins we bring to God in repentance are cleansed; the deadly sin is the one we refuse to repent of at all. To all, the sobering warning is that persistent, hardened rejection of Christ is spiritually fatal, which is exactly why we must keep walking in the light and never make peace with impenitence.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin leading to death as persistent, hardened, unrepentant rejection of Christ and the truth
- Sin not leading to death as the failings confessed and cleansed within a faithful walk (1:7, 9)
- All unrighteousness as sin, against trivializing any sin (v. 17)
- The danger residing in impenitence, not in the stumble that is repented of
- Humility in handling a genuinely difficult text

Discussion Prompts

- What distinguishes sin that leads to death from sin that does not?
- How does this comfort the believer who fears a sin is unforgivable?
- Why is hardened impenitence, rather than the stumble itself, the deadly danger?

Question 6

Student Question:

John assures us that “everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning,” for the One born of God protects him (v. 18). How does this assurance of God’s keeping power coexist with the letter’s repeated warnings to remain faithful, and what part do you play in being kept?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John affirms both God’s keeping power and the believer’s changed life. The one born of God does not make a practice of sin, and is protected by the Son so that the evil one does not touch him to destroy him. This is real assurance of God’s preserving care over His own.

Hold this together with the letter’s warnings, which the teacher should not let drop. John has warned that some go out from among us (2:19), has called believers to abide, and will close with keep yourselves from idols (v. 21). So God’s keeping does not operate apart from our faithfulness; it operates through it. God keeps His own, and His own keep walking with Him.

Address the doctrinal balance directly. This is not the presumption that says a believer is eternally secure regardless of how he lives. Nor is it an anxious insecurity that fears falling with every stumble. It is the confidence that God faithfully guards all who continue to trust and follow Him, working in them the very perseverance He requires. We are kept as we keep ourselves, and we keep ourselves because He is keeping us.

Apply it to the believer's part. Being kept by God is not passive. The same God who guards us calls us to abide, to walk in the light, to keep from idols. Our part is to keep trusting, keep obeying, keep returning to Christ when we stumble, confident that He who began a good work will complete it in all who do not abandon Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's real keeping power over those born of Him (v. 18)
- Keeping that operates through, not apart from, the believer's faithfulness
- Balance against both presumption (once saved, always saved) and anxious insecurity
- The believer's active part: abiding, obeying, keeping from idols

Discussion Prompts

- How do God's keeping power and the call to remain faithful fit together?
- What is your part in being kept by God?
- How does this differ from both presumption and anxious fear?

Question 7

Student Question:

John writes with confidence, "we know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (v. 19). How does this stark contrast between God's people and the world help you understand the spiritual reality you live in each day?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John draws a stark line. Believers are from God; the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. There is no neutral middle ground. This is the spiritual reality behind the ordinary surface of life: two realms, two allegiances, and every person belongs to one or the other.

Help students take this seriously without becoming fearful or conspiratorial. The claim is not that everything in the world is as evil as it could be, but that the world system, in its organized life apart from God, lies under the sway of the evil one. This explains much of what we see: the pull toward sin, the hostility to truth, the disordered values that seem normal.

Draw out the comfort alongside the sobriety. Though the world lies under the evil one, believers know they are from God, and the One in them is greater (4:4). We live in occupied territory, but

we belong to the King who has already won. This frames daily life as a kind of faithful resistance, lived in confidence rather than panic.

Apply it to perception. Seeing this contrast clearly keeps us from naivety about the world and from being seduced by its values. It also fuels compassion, for those under the evil one's power are not merely enemies but captives Christ came to free. We live as God's people, distinct and watchful, in a world that needs the rescue we have received.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The two realms: God's people and the world under the evil one (v. 19), with no neutral ground
- The world system under the sway of the evil one as the reality behind daily life
- Comfort that the One in us is greater (4:4); we live in occupied but already-won territory
- Clear-eyed distinctiveness and compassion for those held captive

Discussion Prompts

- How does this contrast change the way you read what is normal in the world?
- How do we take this seriously without fear or naivety?
- How does it fuel compassion for those still under the evil one's power?

Question 8

Student Question:

John says the world lies in the power of the evil one, yet believers belong to God. Where are you tempted to feel at home in a world that is not your true home, and how does this verse call you to live differently?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question presses verse 19 into the heart. Although we belong to God, we are easily lulled into feeling completely at home in a world that lies under the evil one. The danger is not usually open rebellion but comfortable settling, absorbing the world's values, rhythms, and loves as if this were our true home.

Help students notice the symptoms of being too at home: when the world's approval matters more than God's, when its pleasures crowd out communion with Him, when its assumptions shape our thinking more than Scripture does. We rarely choose this consciously; we drift into it.

Recover the truth of our true belonging. Believers are from God and headed for His presence; we are sojourners here, citizens of another country (Philippians 3:20). This does not make us withdraw in disdain, but it does keep us from sinking our roots so deep in this world that we forget where we belong.

Apply it as a recalibration. Living differently means holding the world loosely, refusing to let its values define us, investing in what is eternal, and keeping our deepest loves anchored in God. Invite students to name one way they have grown too comfortable, and one way they will live more as those who belong to God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The believer as sojourner and citizen of heaven (Philippians 3:20)
- The danger of comfortable settling and absorbing the world's values
- Holding the world loosely while not withdrawing in disdain
- Anchoring our deepest loves in God rather than in our temporary home

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you grown too comfortable in a world that is not your true home?
- What are the symptoms of being too at home in the world?
- How does belonging to God call you to live differently this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

John grounds real assurance in genuine, obedient faith and a faithful walk, climaxing in knowing Him who is true (vv. 18–20), and then warns, “keep yourselves from idols” (v. 21). Why is the assurance John offers different from the presumption of ‘once saved, always saved,’ and how do knowing the true God and guarding against idols belong together?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson and a doctrinally sensitive one, so the teacher should handle it with both clarity and care. John ends the letter with three ringing certainties (we know, we know, we know) and a final command. We know we are born of God and kept by Him; we know we are from God while the world lies under the evil one; and we know the Son of God has come and given us understanding to know Him who is true. Then, abruptly, keep yourselves from idols. The placement is striking and instructive.

Define the assurance John offers, and distinguish it from a false security. John's assurance is robust and real: believers may truly know they have eternal life and are kept by God. But it is the assurance of those with a living, obedient faith and a faithful walk, the very things John has described throughout. It is not the presumption that says, once I believed, I am eternally secure no matter how I now live or what I now do. The teacher should name this contrast plainly. The popular slogan once saved, always saved treats salvation as an irreversible transaction detached from ongoing faith; John treats it as a living relationship that is genuinely kept and genuinely calls for faithfulness to the end.

Show how the warnings of the letter forbid the presumptuous reading. John has said that some went out from among us, proving they were not truly of us (2:19); he has called believers to abide, lest they fail to abide in the Son; and now he commands the assured to keep themselves from idols. You do not warn people against idols if it is impossible for them to turn away. The very fact that John ends a letter about assurance with a command to guard their devotion shows that assurance and vigilance belong together, not in tension but in harmony.

Draw out why knowing the true God and guarding against idols are inseparable. John says the Son has come so that we may know Him who is true, and we are in Him who is true. To know the true God is the heart of eternal life (John 17:3). But the heart that has come to know the true God must guard against the counterfeits that would draw it away, for an idol is anything that takes the place that belongs to Him alone. Devotion to the true God and vigilance against idols are two sides of one faithful heart. The closer we hold to the true God, the more carefully we keep from idols; and keeping from idols is how we hold fast to Him.

Land it pastorally and hopefully. The teacher should leave students neither presumptuous nor terrified. They can have settled assurance: God keeps His own, and the believer who keeps trusting and following Christ may know he has eternal life. And precisely because that assurance is the confidence of a living relationship, it expresses itself in continued faithfulness, holding to the true God and turning from every idol. Real assurance does not make us careless; it makes us devoted. The God who is true is worth our undivided hearts, and the kept are the ones who keep themselves from idols.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Robust assurance for those with a living, obedient faith and faithful walk (vv. 13, 18–20)
- Against once saved, always saved: salvation as a living relationship genuinely kept and genuinely calling for faithfulness
- The letter's warnings (2:19; abiding; v. 21) forbidding a presumptuous security
- Knowing Him who is true as the heart of eternal life (John 17:3)
- Idolatry as anything that takes the place belonging to God alone
- Assurance and vigilance as harmonious: the kept keep themselves from idols

Discussion Prompts

- How is John's assurance different from the slogan once saved, always saved?
- Why would John warn assured believers to keep themselves from idols?
- How do devotion to the true God and guarding against idols belong together?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this passage, from assurance of life, to confident prayer, to knowing the true God and keeping from idols. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you, through this passage, into someone who lives in settled assurance and undivided devotion to the true God.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers John's closing words into a personal response. Trace the movement: real assurance of eternal life for those who believe; the confident, will-aligned prayer and intercession that flow from it; the certainties that we are born of God, belong to God, and know the true God; and the closing call to keep from idols. Assurance and devotion stand together at the letter's end.

Press for one specific way Jesus is forming them. For one it may be receiving settled assurance in place of nagging doubt. For another it may be a renewed life of confident prayer or intercession for a struggling brother. For another it may be identifying and turning from an idol that has been quietly competing for their devotion.

Frame this as the fruit of knowing the true God. The aim of the whole letter has been fellowship with the God who is light, who is love, and who is true. Settled assurance and undivided devotion are what it looks like to live in that fellowship. We do not manufacture them; they grow as we know Him more deeply.

Close the letter where John closes it, with the true God and the idols that threaten Him. Encourage students to leave both confident and vigilant: confident that they have eternal life in the Son, and vigilant to keep their hearts wholly for the true God, letting nothing take His place.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Integration of assurance, prayer, and devotion to the true God
- Knowing the true God as the source of assurance and devotion
- Assurance and vigilance held together at the letter's close
- Undivided devotion to the true God against every idol

Discussion Prompts

- Which is Christ pressing on you most: assurance, prayer, or guarding your devotion?
- What idol most threatens your undivided devotion to the true God?
- What single step will you take to live in settled assurance this week?